SCJR 14, no. 1 (2019): 1-3

Samira K. Mehta *Beyond Chrismukkah: The Christian-Jewish Interfaith Family in the United States*

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), paperback, xii + 260 pp.

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In recent decades sociologists of contemporary American Judaism along with stakeholders in the American Jewish community have been preoccupied by rising rates of Jews who choose to marry non-Jewishly identified partners. Citing connections between two-religion families and declining levels of Jewish religious practice and affiliation, critics have described interfaith marriage largely in terms of a problem to be solved. In July 2019, Israeli Education minister Rafi Peretz offered an extreme formulation of this critique by describing intermarriage as a "second holocaust," a statement met with condemnation by many American Jewish groups.[1]

That increasing numbers of American Jews marry non-Jewishly identified partners is, however, a demographic reality of American Judaism. In 2015, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the rabbinical training institute for the Reconstructionist movement, controversially responded to this new demographic reality with the announcement that it would no longer ban entry to rabbinical students with a non-Jewish partner. President Deborah Waxman stated that just as they expect their students to "model commitments to Judaism in their communal, personal and family lives," so they "witness Jews with non-Jewish partners demonstrating these commitments every day."[2] On the question of Jewish interfaith

[1] Kadari-Ovadia, Shira, Danielle Ziri, and The Associated Press. "Intermarriage among diaspora Jews is 'like a second Holocaust' Israel's Education Minister says." *Haaretz*, July 9, 2019. https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-s-education-minister-says-intermarriage-is-like-a-second-holocaust-1.7486330. (accessed September 13, 2019).

[2] Markoe, Lauren. "First rabbinical school to allow students with non-Jewish partners." *Washington Post*, September 30, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/first-rabbinical-school-

marriage, there is a discernable tension between the policy pronouncements and handwringing of academic and communal Jewish leaders and the textured realities of interfaith lives as they are lived by Jews and their non-Jewish partners. In *Beyond Chrismukkah*, Samira K. Mehta addresses this tension directly, combining analysis of prescriptive materials from communal institutions, messages about interfaith marriage presented in popular culture, and the realities of interfaith lives. Utilizing data garnered through archival research, seven years of oral history interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork, Mehta analyzes the nuanced realities of couples, parents, and children who share Jewish and Christian heritages and traditions. While a number of other works have offered ethnographic treatments of American Jewish interfaith marriages,[3] Mehta employs a broader framework to analyze accommodation strategies used by both Jewish and Christian partners.

Situated between cultural studies and ethnography, *Beyond Chrismukkah* focuses on the ways in which interfaith marriages have been described both in popular culture and by religious institutions. Mehta traces the connections between institutional pronouncements and the processes of accommodation employed by interfaith families to negotiate family relationships, celebrate holidays, and raise children. She offers in her first chapter a broad analytical survey of 20th century prescriptive literature on interfaith partnerships produced by Christian and Jewish organizations and denominations, noticing the diverse cultural and ideological dynamics that have influenced the various positions espoused at institutional levels (such as feminism and concerns for Jewish survival). In chapter two she analyzes depictions of Christian-Jewish interfaith families in popular culture between 1970-1980. Mehta theorizes that this decade in particular saw the formulation of "key tropes" of interfaith marriages that have supplied durable images of married Jews and Christians, from the romanticized *Bridget Loves Bernie* to the less hopeful stories of *The Way We Were* and *Annie Hall* (pp. 51-54). In chapter three she moves to the early decades of the twenty-first century, focusing on Jewish moves towards more positive outreach to interfaith-families, particularly in the context of the Reform movement and in the wake of its landmark 1983 decision to consider children of Jewish fathers as fully Jewish according to the movement's interpretation of *halakhah* (Jewish law). In the remaining chapters Mehta presents ethnographic analyses of Jewish-Christian interfaith family lives. Chapter four is particularly valuable, for Mehta offers a nuanced portrait of interreligious, interracial, and multiethnic Christian-Jewish families that draws careful attention to barriers faced by

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to-allow-students-with-non-jewish-partners/2015/09/30/7e6b449e-67b7-11e5-bdb6-6861f4521205_story.html (accessed September 13, 2017)

[3] Laura Limonic, *Kugel and Frijoles: Latino Jews in the United States* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2019).

Keren R. McGinity, *Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

Keren R. McGinity, *Marrying Out: Jewish Men, Intermarriage & Fatherhood* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2014).

Jennifer A. Thompson, *Jewish on Their Own Terms: How Intermarried Couples are Changing American Judaism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 2014).

Jews of color and multiethnic heritages in institutional Jewish settings. Chapter five focuses on the titular "Chrismukkah" – the synthesis of Hanukah and Christmas during years when the Jewish holiday coincides roughly with December 25. In this chapter, Mehta considers the strategies employed by parents to explain and celebrate the dual religious heritages of their children.

Beyond Chrismukkah offers a holistic presentation of Christian and Jewish interfaith partnerships that acknowledges the agency of both partners, as well as the popular cultural forces that shape their dual religious lives. The book as a whole is oriented toward the questions that Jews and scholars of Judaism have raised about interfaith partnerships, rather than those of their Christian communal and academic counterparts. Undoubtedly, the topic of interfaith marriage looms relatively larger on the Jewish communal agenda, both because of *halakhic* prohibitions against marrying non-Jews as well as twentieth-century concerns about Jewish survival, especially in the wake of the Holocaust. Readers in search of data on Christian interfaith partners may therefore find less material in this book than those with interests in Jewish issues and partnerships. Similarly, the book focuses on cultural rather than theological strategies of adaptation between interfaith couples, again, perhaps, reflecting the praxis-oriented dimensions of American Judaism.

By Mehta's own admission, the book also concentrates on cis-gendered heterosexual marriages and does not include data on non-marital partnerships and on transgender and LGBTQ families. However, these issues of framing and audience by no means detract from the quality of the analysis and Mehta's contributions to the literature on the topic. *Beyond Chrismukkah* intertwines the stories of Jews, Christians, their children, and their families with historical data on the cultural production of images that have at once celebrated and denounced their unions. It offers a sympathetic and nuanced window into the pluralism of interfaith lives and appropriately foregrounds the voices of the partners in the analysis of the ethnographic material. *Beyond Christmukkah* would be a valuable addition to courses on American religion and its various pluralisms, as well as on contemporary Judaism and Christianity.